

# Nelly's Fortune.

Two men were sitting in the smoking-room of Laneshead, the seat-as the guide books tell us-of Daniel Lane, whose ancestors owned the island of Scartha long before the English took over the Orkneys.

The house is an old, weather-worn stone building that stands under the hill at the head of a little bay, and from the smoking-room window one looks across a well-kept though storm-driven garden to the blue sea, and then to a cluster of distant islands.

The room was furnished as a smoking-room, yet there were signs of a woman's use, as there was a piano with a litter of music on it and a work-basket. The room, as well it might be, from the charm of its look-out, seemed to be the most lived in in the house.

"You need not tell me her story, Uncle Dan," said the younger of the two men, George Lane, a lieutenant in the navy and just the man one likes to think is typical of the service. "I know enough when I know that Nelly has promised to be my wife, and that I am the luckiest man on earth."

"That is true enough, young one," said the other, a gray-bearded man of about sixty. "Still, you must hear her story. I wish I had told it to you before. But it is an ugly story to tell, though her life has been happy enough. You know that she is my adopted daughter, and that I brought her from Africa. You know that was her mother."

He pointed to a picture on the wall, an enlarged photograph crudely colored and artistic, and yet evidently of a sweetly beautiful young woman.

"When I knew her first she was living with her father, an Irish Australian digger, Tom O'Brien, one of a family of brothers who, from the earliest days of the diamond fields, were large claim-holders in the Kimberley mine. It was a bad day for her when she fell in love with Dick Johnson, a young fellow who like most of us had come out to the diamond fields to seek his fortune, but he never did much to find it until he married Tom O'Brien's daughter.

"He managed to get over O'Brien, and got some claim in one of the mines from him. But that was no good. In a few years he was sold up. Then he persuaded his father-in-law to give him a billet under O'Brien Brothers. He was made secretary, and for some time was supposed to have turned over a new leaf; but he was always a bad lot, and in a year or two he had the floor manager of the company were caught stealing a big diamond, and they were both sentenced to seven years. Nelly knew nothing about this. She was a child at the time."

"Why should she ever know it? It will only pain her," answered George.

"But, of course, it makes no difference to me. I would consider myself the luckiest man on earth to have gained her love, even if she had fifty convict fathers. By the by, what happened to him? Will he give any more trouble?"

"He never will, but his story may two years after his sentence, there was a rising among the convicts on the breaker at Cape Town, where he was sent. He was in it; in fact, he was the ringleader. It was an attempt to escape, and in the fight he killed a warder, and for this he was tried, sentenced and hanged."

Lane looked curiously into his nephew's face as he said this, but if he were afraid that what he had told would make the other unwilling to marry the daughter of a man with such a history he was at once reassured.

"Nelly knows nothing about this, I suppose. Well, she never need. Not that I think so much of it. However, just a man's punishment is one can understand his fighting for his liberty," he said.

"Well, that is the story," continued Lane. "The year that Johnson was hung his wife died. That year was the beginning of the depression on the diamond fields, which lasted for some time and ruined many a man. The firm of O'Brien Bros. came to an end, the bank taking over their claims for money advanced on them.

"Tom O'Brien died, more of the bad times than anything else. The other brothers sailed for England and the ship they were in went down. Nelly, who had been born the granddaughter of the richest digger on the fields, was left an orphan, with no means and without a relation in the world that anyone knew."

"Now, I had been a boarder at the Johnson's, going there when they were hard up. I had taken a spell at the civil service about that time, but when my office was abolished, had gone down the river, putting the money the government gave me into a digging snec. It came off pretty well. I don't suppose any one ever found better in the bed of the river than I did. I worked a patch of ground right out again, as it does in the river came down again, as it does in the summer, I had made some £15,000, and every one was talking about my good luck. I determined to go home, and as there seemed to be no one in the world to look after Nelly, I took her with me; and you know the rest."

"Yes; how she grew up the sweetest girl you ever lived, and how she has promised a fellow who is not half good enough for her, but who would give his life to make her happy, to be his wife," answered George Lane. "Yes, I suppose you were right to keep the story from her, and yet I hate a secret; there is always the chance that, like an old spent shell, it may explode."

"You are right," said Lane. "and the mischief of it is that I think the secret may come out soon. When I was down at the landing waiting for you this morning, I saw a stranger, who had come by the steamer yesterday, hanging about by the inn. They told me he said he was from the diamond fields, and he had been asking all about me. I had thought that I remembered his face, and when I heard that, it came across me that he was Sam Dredge, the floor manager of O'Brien Brothers, who was run in with Nelly's father. If he knew who Nelly was, he might try and trade on his secret."

"He would be an infernal villain, and he would find the island of Scartha rather close quarters if he tried on that game."

"Well, seeing him has made me feel uneasy, but let's forget him. There is one thing, in marrying Nelly you are taking a penniless bride. I have spent all I got out of the Vaal river in restoring the house, and in doing a bit of improvement about the place, building a sea wall here, and putting up some decent houses for the crofters there. The place comes to you, as it must; all my money has gone into it, but there is still a drain of debt and charges on it. You had better have married an heiress."

"I love the old place where our people have lived so long, but I love Nelly a thousand times more," replied George.

"I don't blame you, though I would like to have thought that there was a

little money to go on the property," said Daniel.

Just then the door was opened, and a girl of about twenty came in, whose blue eyes and dark eyebrows bore witness to the strain of Irish blood in her veins, while her bright radiant beauty was out of keeping with the story that had just been told.

"What a lot of business you must have had, she said, with a blush, as she remembered what the business would be. "Tea is ready, and dear, there is a man waiting at the gate who wants to see you."

"What is he like?" asked Lane.

"He has never seen him before on this island. He is a tallish man, with a red beard."

"He is the man I talked to you about," Lane said to his nephew. "I will see him here. I would like you to be present. Don't wait for us, Nelly, but go and have yours."

Walking to the window, which opened to the ground, he went out, and soon came back followed by a tall man whose shaved face was set off by a red chin beard. He had rather a colored nose, and a pair of little eyes that wandered restlessly about the room, though after some time they fixed themselves on the picture of Nelly's mother.

"Well, what do you want?" said Daniel Lane, suppose you have come to see me about something?"

"Yes, right, but I think it would be best for me to say what I've got to say alone—meaning no offense to this young gentleman, only we knew each other out yonder where they find diamonds."

"I have no secrets from this gentleman. If you have anything to say, you can say it before him. Who are you and what do you want?"

"You know who I am, mister—Sam Dredge, who was run in along with Dick Johnson, and who has done his seven years, and ain't ashamed to talk of it. Now, I say, hadn't you better listen to what I have to say without any gent being present?"

"You can talk before this gentleman if you can hold your tongue," answered Lane. "What have you come about?"

"I have come to have a little talk about my mate, poor Dick Johnson, which ain't a very pleasant subject, and what I have to say relates to that."

And he pointed with his thumb at the picture on the wall.

"Say what you have to say, or clear out without saying it," said Daniel Lane, as he faced round at the other, looking for all his sixty years—very big and powerful.

"You're going to carry it off with a bounce, but I say now it's 'ard. I comes out of doing my seven year, and what do I hear? Why, that a month or two after Dick Johnson was run in, you goes to the river and finds £15,000 worth of snec in the bed of the river. Ain't that a treat? Other poor beggars down the river live on mealy meat, and don't find nothing, but you get 'em all. Ain't I a right to something? Don't you think that if I were to open my mouth there'd be a deal of talk over these blessed islands where you go in for being such a toff? Come! you know what I know, and if I hold my tongue I want it made up to me."

"Now, listen to me, Sam Dredge, I know what you know, and if you think you can do any good by talking and letting Dick Johnson's daughter know make a great mistake. I won't pay of the shameful end of her father, you you blackmail, and this gentleman, who is going to marry her, never will. But if I share in it, I shall most likely hear of it before you have left the islands. If so, I will hammer you till you wish I would kill you outright; and if you have left these islands, we will find you out, wherever you are, and thrash you. Ay! won't we, George, my mate?"

"Our friend here can depend on a thrashing from me," said George. "In fact, perhaps it would be as well if I gave him something on account."

There was no doubt that these speeches had a considerable effect on the respectable Mr. Sam Dredge, but they seemed rather to puzzle than to frighten him.

He stared into Daniel Lane's face as if he were trying to read its expression.

"I want to tell Dick Johnson's daughter about her father's shameful end? Well, I never! Yes, of course; perhaps it would 'ardly be the thing. Well, yes, I will say good evening. The days lengthen out wonderful for the time of year in these islands, don't they, Mr. Daniel Lane? Oh, I am quite sure every of thinking only I have been misunderstood." And Sam Dredge, with his wandering eye again and again coming to an anchor on the picture, bowed himself out of the room to the window.

When he got outside he walked very slowly, and kept taking furtive glances at the open window.

The steamer left that evening for Kirkwall, but Dredge did not leave by her. He was in comfortable quarters, he said, as he drank his whisky and water and talked to the landlord of the little inn.

"Yes," said the latter, in answer to something Dredge had said. "I think one might say that the people here are as well behaved as on any of the islands I am an old man, but I never heard of anyone from here being sent to prison. On the mainland of Orkney sometimes the fishermen will take a drop of grog, and then they will fight; and I once heard a man on the mainland who got into a house at night and stole whisky. Here if people lock up their doors at night it is all they think of doing. There are no thieves on the island."

"No bolting or barring up of houses, ay," said Dredge. "It's to your credit, that is what I say."

In the mean time the Lanes had not wasted many thoughts about their visitor. From the way he behaved when he left they began to doubt whether he was quite right in his head. He had gone off like a man who was perfectly provoked and bewildered, and yet there was no denying that they had both expressed themselves very clearly.

George Lane, however, put him and the painful story with which he was associated out of his mind, and he determined that the past should throw no shadow over him.

Very often when he is at sea far away from all he loves best, will he think of that evening he spent at the old home of his race after Nelly had promised to be his wife.

When he got to his room he found he could not sleep, and after some time he gave up the attempt, and sat at the open window smoking and looking out

It was that sort of twilight which is all the night one gets when the days are at their longest at Orkney.

Everything was still, except the faint splash of the sea. After a while he saw the figure of a man walking on the path that led from the seashore up to his house.

"A strange hour for a visitor," he thought, but even then the idea of a thief never occurred to him. The thing was so out of keeping with his surroundings.

But the man seemed to be coming up to the house, and he passed underneath his window. Walking stealthily on the grass, he went on till he got to the smoking-room window. Then George recognized the man. He was their friend of the afternoon, Sam Dredge. For some minutes he stood at the window which had been shut up, fumbling at the lock. It appeared to give way without much difficulty.

As the man went into the smoking room, George dropped from his window on to the grass—it was only a fall of a few feet—then he silently followed in the other's footsteps, but he came to a stop at the window. The man had lit a candle, and when George came up, he was in the act of taking down the picture of Nelly's mother that hung on the wall.

"Now what can his little game be?" thought George as he watched the eccentric burglar take the picture down and lay it face downwards on the table, and then proceed with his knife to cut away the card-board back. Then he stooped forward, and from the expression of his face George felt sure that he had found what he was looking for. Just then George sprang into the room. The man turned around fiercely, and with an oath rushed at him, making a stab at him with the knife.

But George was too quick for him, and got hold of his wrist with his left hand, while he let out with his right, hitting him on the point of his chin and sending him staggering into the corner of the room.

The knife had dropped out of his hand, and the first thing that George did was to secure it. Then he stood watching his prostrate foe, ready enough for him in case he should think of getting up and recommence proceedings. As he began to rise, there was a sound of footsteps along the passage, and Daniel Lane came into the room.

"Hallo, George, my boy, what's the meaning of this? Why, here is our friend again."

"I don't know what it is, but what he came after is there," answered George, as he pointed at the picture on the table.

Daniel Lane took up the candle and walked to the picture, and as he did so he gave an exclamation of surprise.

"And enough to come after, too," he said. "Why, by Jove, I never saw a nicer parcel of diamonds all the time I was on the fields."

Well he might say so, for the back of the photograph, from which the card board had been stripped off, was covered with rough diamonds, all of them from ten to twenty carats.

By this time Sam Dredge had got on his legs again. He made, however, no attempt to escape or interfere, but stood looking at the other two out of his ugly little eyes.

"Now, look here, let's be reasonable. That there parcel of stuff is mine by rights, 'cause Dick Johnson and I got 'em, and we hid 'em there; and Dick being out of it, I take his share. I have done my time for the diamonds, and ought to have 'em. When I heard, after I came out, how you'd found down the river, I made sure as the diamonds you got came from behind that pic-

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ture, where we put all we took from O'Brien Brothers' floor. You wouldn't be the first by a long bit who went off to the river with the diamonds ready found. This afternoon, when I was here, it came over me all of a sudden that you knew nothing about the diamonds, and they still were where Dick Johnson and I had hid 'em behind the picture.

"Well, I came for 'em, but you've been too many for me. Whoever they belong to, they don't belong to you. Now I says, halves or they go back to O'Brien Brothers' representatives. Come, there is plenty for us both and I says halves."

"Halves, you rascal. Do you think I would go halves in plunder with you? Go back to their rightful owners, they shall," said Daniel Lane, and though the idea did force itself into his thoughts that the price of those diamonds he saw glittering on the table would help to pay off the debts on his property, he never, to do him justice, let it stay there.

"You are a fool, Dan Lane. A bigger fool than I thought you," said the disgraced Sam Dredge, "letting this parcel go to you don't know who."

"I don't care whose they are, they are not mine or yours," said Lane. "By the Lord Harry, though, I do know, George, they are Nelly's. She is the only real descendant of the O'Brien brothers left alive that I ever heard of. That is Nelly's fortune, and after all you will marry an heiress."

And so it turned out. Daniel Lane kicked Dredge out of doors. The next day he wrote to the high court at Kimberley, who had administered the estate of Tom O'Brien, telling how he had found a parcel of diamonds that belonged to the O'Brien brothers. There were a good many difficulties and legal formulas, but in the end the diamonds were sold and their price went to Nelly as the heiress of her grandfather and great-uncles. They realized some twelve thousand pounds, for they were all picked stones.

Nelly never knew how they had been found. Her only trouble seems to be that her father's husband has often to be away from her, and her life will not be darkened by the knowledge of her father's crimes and fate.—Illustrated Bits.

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